

# LISTENING TO AND LEARNING FROM THE COMMUNITY

North Carolina Division of Child  
Development and Early Education  
Stakeholder Engagement Study:  
Community Report



NC DEPARTMENT OF  
HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES  
Division of Child Development  
and Early Education



## 1 WHY IS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

**The early years matter.** Experiences during the first few years of life can set the foundation for all future growth and learning. Understanding this, the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) is committed to setting every child up for success. To do so, the Division is focused on increasing access to high-quality child care for young children—from infants through preschool age—and their families across North Carolina.

**Early childhood educators understand what the children in their care need to thrive.** Making sure child care programs are meeting the needs of all children and families often involves engaging with key members of the early childhood community, such as families, Family Child Care Home Providers, early childhood directors and administrators, and other community leaders. Knowing that there are unique needs and a wealth of experiences and insights within the community, the Division wants to ensure these stories and perspectives are heard and understood.

**The best way to create meaningful change is to listen.** By offering more opportunities to listen to and embrace the ideas, stories, and perspectives of the early childhood community, the Division aims to improve child care across the state. DCDEE is dedicated to deepening its understanding of community members' needs and priorities and the impact of the services the Division provides. This way, the Division is able to make sure child care programs respond to and meet the diverse needs of all North Carolina's young children and their families.



## 2 WHAT IS THE NORTH CAROLINA DCDEE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT STUDY?

**The North Carolina DCDEE Stakeholder Engagement Study was conducted to learn from and strengthen connections with the early childhood community.** This study focused on understanding how well the Division has done in the past to provide opportunities for community members to share their experiences and feedback, as well as gathering input on ways the Division can improve its engagement efforts in the future.

### Qualitative approaches include . . .

- Using tools such as interviews, focus groups, and open-ended survey responses to dig deeper into the realities of community members
- Asking and answering questions focused on the “how” and “why,” to allow for a deeper understanding of experiences and contexts
- Centering people’s knowledge and lived experiences



**This study also marks the first phase of a larger effort.** To best serve families and communities, the Division is working to create a framework that will guide more qualitative approaches to decisions about services for young children. Lessons learned from the study will be used to inform and develop the framework. This framework will be an important step to ensuring the voices and lived experience of the early childhood community are a driving force behind important changes to child care in the state—now and in the future.

### Who are stakeholders?

Stakeholders are important members of the community who are impacted by the programs and decisions of DCDEE. In this study, stakeholders are family members, early childhood teachers, early childhood directors/administrators, and Family Child Care Home Providers. (They are also referred to as “community members” in this report.) The ideas, experiences, and needs they share are vital to make sure that all supports are inclusive, responsive, and meet the needs of the community.

**1. Conducting the Study**  
(2022–2023)

**2. Designing the Framework**  
(2023–2024)

**3. Rolling Out the Framework**  
(2024 and beyond)



### 3 WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE STUDY?

DCDEE partnered with School Readiness Consulting (SRC) to conduct the study. SRC reached out to and heard from diverse stakeholders through focus groups, interviews, surveys, and advisory workgroups. A total of 1,838<sup>1</sup> individuals from across North Carolina participated in the study.

## North Carolina's 1,838 stakeholder voices



**1,770**  
STAKEHOLDERS  
PARTICIPATED IN  
**ONLINE SURVEYS**

→ **354** EARLY  
CHILDHOOD TEACHERS,  
**1,103** EARLY CHILDHOOD  
DIRECTORS/ADMINISTRATORS,  
**145** FAMILY CHILD CARE  
HOME PROVIDERS, AND  
**168** DCDEE STAFF MEMBERS

Surveys allowed the  
research team to get a  
broad understanding of  
varying stakeholder  
experiences and opinions.



**68** STAKEHOLDERS  
PARTICIPATED IN  
**FOCUS GROUPS  
AND INTERVIEWS**

→ **22** FAMILY MEMBERS, **9** EARLY CHILDHOOD  
TEACHERS, **21** EARLY CHILDHOOD  
DIRECTORS/ ADMINISTRATORS,  
**6** FAMILY CHILD CARE HOME PROVIDERS,  
AND **10** DCDEE STAFF MEMBERS

Focus groups and interviews, conducted in English  
and Spanish, helped provide a deeper understanding  
of stakeholders' perspectives and highlighted  
effective strategies.



**24** STAKEHOLDERS  
PARTICIPATED IN  
**ADVISORY WORKGROUPS**

→ **3** FAMILY MEMBERS, **3** EARLY CHILDHOOD  
TEACHERS, **4** EARLY CHILDHOOD  
DIRECTORS/ ADMINISTRATORS,  
**3** EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS-LEVEL STAFF,  
**1** FAMILY CHILD CARE HOME PROVIDER, AND  
**10** DCDEE STAFF MEMBERS

Advisory workgroups played an important role in  
providing feedback and guidance to support the study.

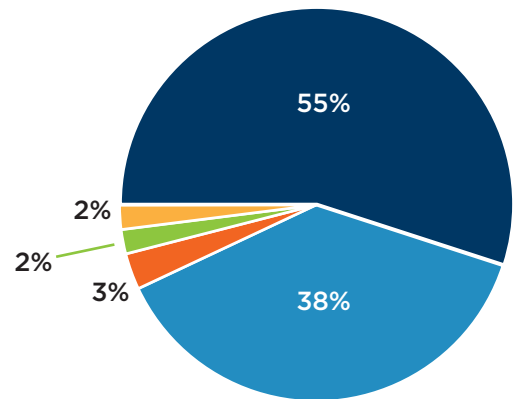
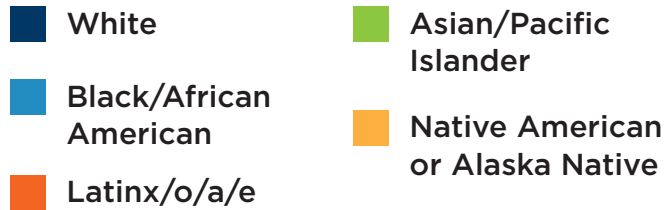
Through these engagements, the research team was able to hear from and learn about the experiences of a diverse group of early childhood community members representing different races and ethnicities, as well as communities across the state (see Figures 1 and 2).

1. 1,838 unique individuals participated in this study. Some individuals engaged in more than one study activity.

**FIGURE 1**

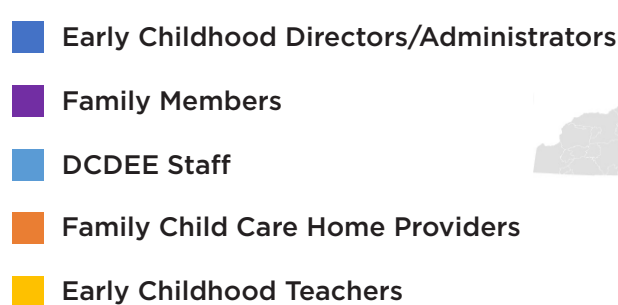
## Study participants by race

(n = 1,788)



**FIGURE 2**

## Map of study participant locations (community member focus groups and DCDEE staff survey) (n = 164)



**SRC's research team gathered community members' opinions, stories, and experiences to help answer the following three key questions:**

- 1** What has the state done previously related to qualitative research, storytelling, and stakeholder input?
- 2** What qualitative data need to be collected to drive decision-making, and how should they be collected?
- 3** How can the state build and promote equity-centered data use and decision-making that is driven by qualitative data that center the early childhood community?

The findings from the study helped the Division staff to learn more about what is working and what could be improved with stakeholder engagement and their use of qualitative approaches. These findings will also inform their next steps as they make plans to provide more and better opportunities for the early childhood community to provide regular feedback and input.





## 4 WHAT DID THE DIVISION LEARN, AND WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The following are key findings from the study highlighting the strengths and opportunities for DCDEE to improve stakeholder engagement and the use of community feedback, stories, and other qualitative data.

WHAT WE HEARD	WHAT CAN BE DONE
1 The Division provides different opportunities to share feedback, but early childhood community members are not always aware of them and don't always participate.	Develop additional approaches for collecting and using community members' stories and feedback.
2 Early childhood community members want different options for sharing their stories and want to be met where they are.	
3 The Division has heard mostly from early childhood directors and administrators. Other community members faced barriers that kept them from sharing their perspectives.	Increase outreach efforts and address barriers to ensure diverse voices are heard.
4 Early childhood community members want to share stories about lived experiences and how policies impact practice and people "on the ground."	Provide opportunities for early childhood community members to share stories and lived experiences to inform decision-making.
5 Early childhood community members want to share feedback with those they trust.	Work to develop trust with community members.
6 Early childhood community members want to see action based on the feedback and experience they share.	Use feedback from early childhood community members to inform concrete actions.

# FINDING 1

The Division provides different opportunities to share feedback, but early childhood community members are not always aware of them and don't always participate.

Families, Family Child Care Home Providers, and community leaders shared many stories and experiences about the engagement opportunities that the Division has provided them. For example, the Division reaches out to early childhood community members through emails, web-based surveys, focus groups, and meetings (see Table 1). But not everyone is aware of these opportunities or receives this information in the same way. Sometimes, when community members share information, they don't know what happens to it. They want more communication and more opportunities to work together with the Division. For example, in-person and virtual focus groups and interviews are seen as more effective, suggesting the need for strategies that are more interactive and diverse.

Teachers are sometimes unaware of opportunities to engage with the Division.

“I was a teacher for five years. . . . I'm just only now becoming aware that [the Division] even had a newsletter . . . and a blog that they're posting on. And it's very interesting. Now that I know that I'll go peek every now and again.”

- Early Childhood Teacher

**TABLE 1**  
**Approaches used by DCDEE to collect information from the community (DCDEE staff survey)**

Which of the following communication methods does DCDEE use to collect data on stakeholder groups' personal stories, experiences, and needs?

TYPE OF COMMUNICATION METHOD	PERCENTAGE
Email	72%
Web-based survey	51%
Focus group or interview	45%
In-person meeting	35%
Phone call	32%
State website	28%
Written or mail-in survey	17%
Social media	5%
Other	4%
Text message	2%

## FINDING 2

**Early childhood community members want different options for sharing their stories and want to be met where they are.**

Community members have different preferences for how they want to share their stories. For example, early childhood directors, Family Child Care Home Providers, and early childhood teachers favored emails. Some also showed a preference for direct communication methods, such as phone calls and text messages (Figure 3). This shows that using just one method will not work to meet everyone's needs.

Community members asked for more options and different ways to engage. This includes making surveys user-friendly and offering both virtual and in-person options at varying times to meet different schedules. It also involves offering the option to communicate in languages other than English to make sure everyone can participate.

The Division understands that offering different ways to engage makes it possible for a wide variety of community members to participate and share their perspectives. The Division will work to expand methods of engagement to build a more inclusive and supportive community.

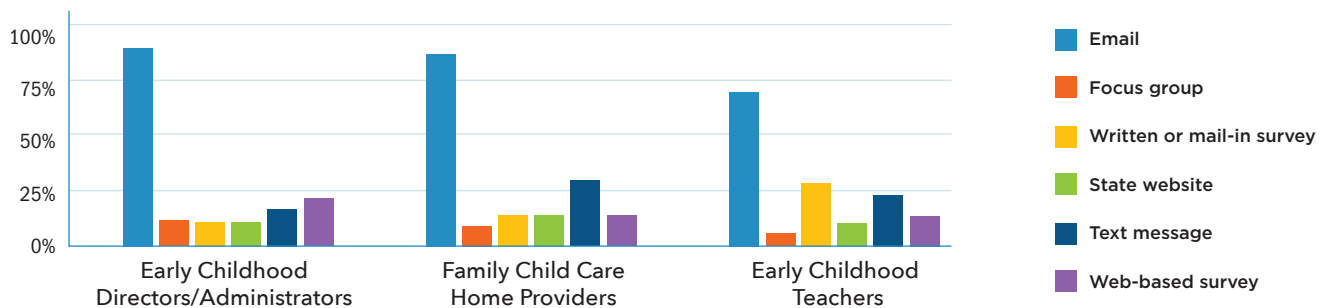
**“ Not everybody has time to be in a focus group, and not everybody's going to want to sit at their computer and fill out a survey online. And so you have to have more than one option for folks to provide that information to. ”**

**– Early Childhood Director/Administrator**

**FIGURE 3**

### Stakeholder communication preferences

Which of the following communication methods would you prefer to use to share your experiences and needs with state agencies such as North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE)?



## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

**Develop additional approaches for collecting and using community members' stories and feedback.**

The Division has found different and useful ways to listen to the voices of the early childhood community. At the same time, there are opportunities to improve. The Division can focus on using the best methods for communication depending on what DCDEE staff hope to accomplish. For example, if they want to tell community members about a decision they've made, they might share it through an email newsletter. If they want to gather stories from early childhood directors, they might offer focus groups or they might send early childhood teachers a survey by email. DCDEE staff can also make sure they listen to what community members need and prefer—for example, offering focus groups virtually or in person, scheduling events at times when people can attend, and sending emails and newsletters in languages other than English.



## FINDING 3

The Division has heard mostly from early childhood directors and administrators. Other community members faced barriers that kept them from sharing their perspectives.

Early childhood directors and administrators had the most opportunities to share feedback and experiences with the Division. This was mostly because they have regular interactions with DCDEE consultants who ask them for feedback and listen to their stories.

The community members who did not get to interact regularly with the Division or faced barriers to sharing their perspectives included families, early childhood teachers, and Family Child Care Home Providers. Early childhood teachers reported having very little contact with the Division. Family Child Care Home Providers felt their unique needs and circumstances are not fully understood or considered by the Division. Families who speak languages other than English face barriers because of a lack of materials available in their home language. Also, families with children who have special needs expressed frustration in sharing feedback with the Division and not feeling as if their feedback was heard.

There were other barriers to sharing perspectives with the Division. These included not being able to take time off work, being worried about losing funding or services, and having problems with accessing or using technology (see Figure 4).

**There's a disconnect between the Division and teachers . . .**

**“ We're not clear about how [the Division] can help us, how they can support us. ”**

- Early Childhood Teacher

**. . . between the Division and Family Child Care Home Providers . . .**

**“ Sometimes I feel like there's a disconnect with the [Family Child Care Home Providers] in Raleigh. And I think sometimes they don't feel heard [on] what their needs are. ”**

- DCDEE Staff Member

**. . . and between the Division and families who speak languages other than English.**

**“ I think we need to look at being a little bit more diverse. I think that we are not quite as user-friendly with people who speak other languages, Spanish and beyond. ”**

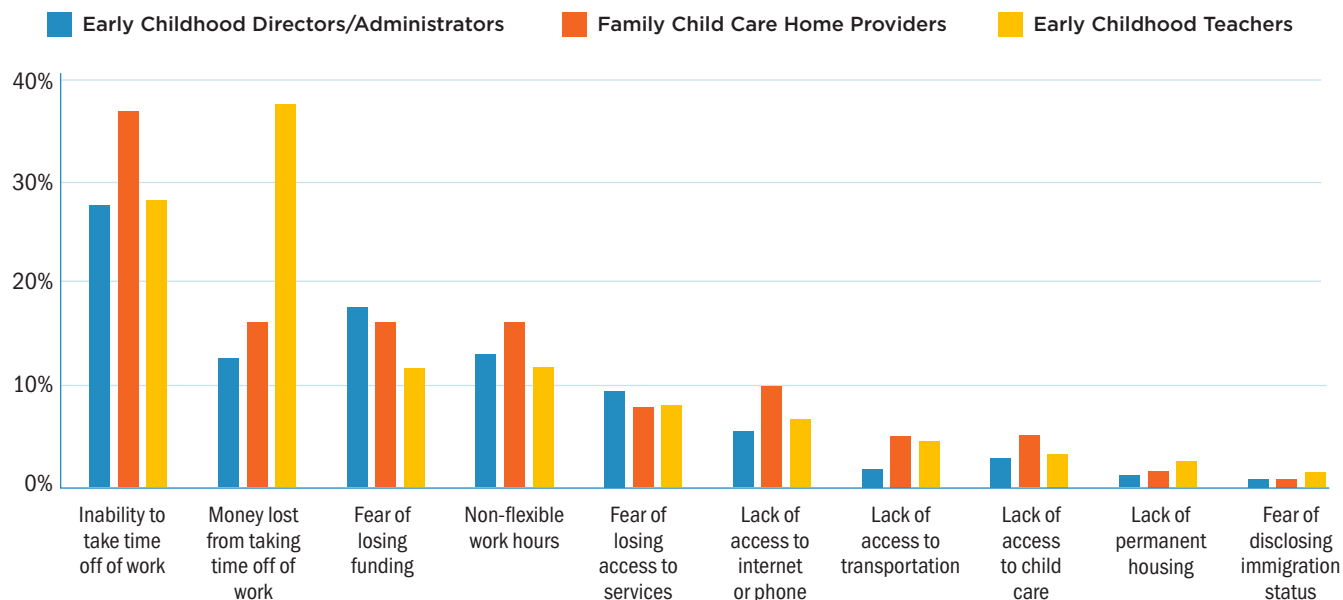
- DCDEE Staff Member



**FIGURE 4**

## Barriers to participation among community stakeholders (CCSA statewide workforce survey)

Which of the following make it difficult to share experiences and needs with state agencies?



### Families worry about the consequences of sharing feedback with the Division.

“ For families who are on child care subsidy, I think there is likely a risk that they feel they would be taking to share feedback about their care because they don’t want to lose that voucher. ”

– Family Member

### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

**Increase outreach efforts and address barriers to ensure diverse voices are heard.**

The Division could focus specific outreach on early childhood community members who have faced barriers in the past, such as those from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities; families and Family Child Care Home Providers who speak a language other than English, and those living in rural communities. The Division could also work to expand opportunities for Family Child Care Home Providers to participate in feedback loops and decision-making spaces. Overall, the Division could work to make sure all of its communication methods are designed so they effectively and efficiently reach all members of the early childhood community.

## FINDING 4

**Early childhood community members want to share stories about lived experiences and how policies impact practice and people “on the ground.”**

Early childhood community members want more opportunities to share what’s real about their daily lives. They also want to share how the policies the Division makes directly and significantly impact them.

For those providing child care services, daily challenges might include feeling exhausted from the pressures of their jobs and demanding workloads. Family Child Care Home Providers struggle with low wages that don’t meet their needs, and early childhood directors and administrators are faced with ongoing staff shortages. On the other hand, families face the burden of high child care costs, which can limit their access to these services. Additionally, community members can find it difficult to adapt to new policies and guidelines, which often require significant changes in the way they work or live.

Following new policy changes, early childhood administrators and directors want communication and understanding. They want to ask questions and have their questions answered. They want to hear that someone understands their work and to be able to share how their work impacts the lives of children and families.

DCDEE believes in the value and power of these perspectives. The Division understands that this type of feedback can meaningfully inform decisions in a way that is grounded in the lived experiences of community members.

**Early childhood teachers and Family Child Care Home Providers want to share their experiences and be heard.**

**“ Just support for us mentally, things that we go through, things that we can help to do better for our children . . . being more aware of those things. Burnout, just being overwhelmed sometimes with everything that goes on. Yeah, I think it’ll be good for them to hear our voices. ”**

**- Family Child Care Home Provider**





**“ Our job may not be that physical, but that emotional drain, it is a lot. It really is. Then let’s not talk about the pay. We have families too. We have dreams, we have goals, things that we want. A lot of the higher-ups, they already have all of that. . . . But I’m the one on the front line doing . . . I’m the one that’s putting in the work. I value myself. I value my work. I just want somebody else . . . Just see me. ”**

– Early Childhood Teacher

---

**Early childhood directors want more interactions with the Division on why policy decisions are made.**

**“ Why are you changing this? And why do we have to do that? That’s the type of feedback that we would love to give so they can understand how to put people at ease and to relieve the stress. ”**

– Early Childhood Director/Administrator

---

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

**Provide opportunities for early childhood community members to share stories and lived experiences to inform decision-making.**

DCDEE should include early childhood community members’ daily experiences with child care as a big part of their decision-making. The Division can look at ways to gather more personal stories that show how policies and decisions affect communities. These stories can help the Division better understand what communities go through every day and how the Division can change things for the better.



## FINDING 5

**Early childhood community members want to share feedback with those they trust.**

Families trust their friends, other family members, and their children's teachers because of their close relationships—families feel they can easily approach these people. Early childhood teachers most often trust other teachers because they feel they won't be judged and have similar experiences. Early childhood directors and administrators trust others in a similar role and also consultants from the Division or people who provide training or technical assistance, because these are the people who offer advice and help solve problems.

Although community members trust state consultants and local resource agencies, there seems to be a gap when it comes to trust in the Division as a whole. Some community members expressed concerns about the intentions of state agencies. Directors and administrators specifically mentioned there are differences in the level of support depending on the role of the consultant (e.g., licensing consultant or health inspector).

Despite these concerns, there is a strong desire for open communication with those community members trust, which includes familiar community organizations. Division staff emphasized the importance of trust and wanted to make sure community members knew that their feedback wouldn't negatively impact their programs. Some DCDEE staff suggested that it might be good for local agencies to collect feedback because community members already have trusted relationships with these familiar organizations.

**“ Fifteen years ago, [DCDEE consultants] were your advocate and they trusted you and you trusted them. They came to help not to find fault or blame. I had no problem contacting them with a question or help. I now lay low and do not communicate unless necessary. ”**

**– Early Childhood Director/Administrator**

**Families prefer to share their stories and feedback with trusted groups.**

**“ I don't feel comfortable sharing with them [the Division] because I feel like they're not really on my team. ”**

**– Family Member**

**“ I think working through community-based, community-rooted groups makes more sense than DCDEE collecting it directly or working through a research group that folks don't know. ”**

**– Family Member**





**“ I don’t know who I can reach out to without being an aggravation. I have several of the people’s phone numbers in upper management at DCDEE but I worry that my problems are so minor that maybe they don’t really have time to deal with them. I don’t want to ever be ‘that Director.’ ”**

– Early Childhood Director/Administrator

---

**DCDEE staff are aware of the need to foster trust.**

**“ We should let providers know that speaking with DCDEE staff members will not negatively impact their program. Letting them all know that we are also here to listen and to help. ”**

– DCDEE Staff Member

---

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

**Work to strengthen trust with community members.**

The Division knows that trust with early childhood community members is necessary. There is an opportunity to create more space for open discussions, strengthen relationships, and promote two-way communication. This might involve organizing more community visits and engaging in conversations, as well as creating spaces for more regular feedback loops with community members. Developing relationships with community-based organizations and respected local leaders could also lead to more meaningful engagement opportunities.



## FINDING 6

### Early childhood community members want to see action based on the feedback and experiences they share.

This feeling was true for all community members. They believe that if their stories make changes in the Division, a positive ripple effect could result, benefiting everyone—from programs to the children and families they serve.

Directors and administrators mentioned that feeling heard and seeing their feedback lead to action was important. They thought if there was no visible change, people might stop giving feedback or participating in engagement opportunities.

Early childhood teachers also said it was important to feel heard. Feeling heard would make them feel supported and appreciated. It would make them feel as though they were doing a good job in the classroom.

Families said it was important for the Division to understand their needs—particularly that families want their children to be safe, included, and cared for in programs.

The Division staff said they understand it's important to share with the community that their feedback has been heard and is being used to help make decisions. Division staff agreed that the way to build trust with community members and show them that their feedback has meaning is to take action based on the input and then tell the community members about it.

### Community members want to see action based on the feedback and experiences they share.

“ I think that the most impactful way [is] to be able to follow up and be like, ‘We heard what you said when you shared this with us and here are some things we’re doing about it.’ Again, I think that’s hard to staff for that, but I think that’s probably most effective. ”

– Family Member

“ I do that with my teachers. We don’t just change rules or change procedures without talking . . . letting them know that they were heard makes a big difference because they’ll say, ‘Oh I’m so glad. Thank you for listening.’ Just putting it out there that ‘We heard you’ is affirming to people. ”

– Early Childhood Director/Administrator



**By being attuned to the needs of the community, more practical decisions can be made.**

**“Hearing from [community members] can give some real and ‘raw’ insight around what’s happening with families, providers, teachers, and administrators. Decisions can be made about what is really happening as opposed to what they think is happening.”**

– DCDEE Staff Member

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

**Use feedback from early childhood community members to inform concrete actions.**

The Division can show its commitment to action and transparency by using community feedback to make meaningful changes. For example, the Division can improve communication by providing regular updates about how community stories and feedback are being used. The Division can make public reports inclusive, accessible, and beneficial to everyone. The Division can commit to regularly evaluating and improving the way it does this work.

## 5 WHAT MIGHT BE NEXT?

Moving forward, DCDEE and SRC will use these findings to inform and develop a framework to guide community engagement efforts. Between July 2023 and June 2024, the process will include:

- public sessions to share study findings and recommendations with community members,
- meetings to develop the framework,
- support for DCDEE staff to build their knowledge and skills around qualitative approaches,
- piloting the framework to see how it works, and
- updating the framework based on DCDEE and community feedback to create a final version.

DCDEE and SRC will work together to ensure that the framework reflects what has been learned so far and that community members have ongoing opportunities to continue to shape the framework.

The hope is that this effort will be an important step for DCDEE to further center the voices and lived experiences of the early childhood community. Listening to and learning directly from community members will pave the way for more inclusive and responsive child care programs and services. As the Division works toward its mission, community members' ideas, insights, and guidance will be invaluable in ensuring that the state's youngest children have what they need to reach their full potential.





# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all the participants who contributed to this report. Thank you to the community members who generously shared their insights and experiences. We also extend our appreciation to the DCDEE staff and advisory committees who actively participated in this study. Your valuable input and collaboration have been instrumental in shaping the findings and recommendations. Thank you for your time, dedication, and commitment to improving early childhood education in our community.

## AUTHORS

Mariam Dahbi  
Judi Stevenson-Garcia  
Nicole Sharpe

## CONTRIBUTORS (in alphabetical order)

Traci Borgh	Aisha Pittman Fields
BreAnna Davis Tribble	Sallie Strueby

---

## ADVISORY COUNCIL

We have tremendous appreciation for our Advisory Council workgroups, whose honest insights and steady guidance were integral to shaping this study from beginning to end.

## COMMUNITY WORKGROUP MEMBERS (in alphabetical order)

Marilyn Bernabe	Devonya Govan-Hunt	Rochelle Sanders	Joy Turner
Mindy Davis	Candice Knox	Christopher Singleton	Banu Valladares
Davida Dawson	Kayla Lawson	Karen Thompson	
Margo Ford Crosby	Sharee Pemberton	Jennifer Threadgill	

## DCDEE WORKGROUP MEMBERS (in alphabetical order)

Sonya Ashe	Vallarie Douglas	Leslie Gordon	Melissa Loehr
Nakita Bellamy	Tammy Freeman	Allison Keisler	Tukeshia McCormick
Lauren Davis	Jennifer Gardner		

---

A huge thanks to our partners at the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education who worked alongside the School Readiness Consulting team throughout the development and implementation of this study. We felt your commitment to and passion for this effort throughout the process. We look forward to the strides the Division will continue to make as you enhance your processes in service to the early childhood workforce and children and families.

Ariel Ford	Toni King	Justine Rogoff
Sarah Hutchinson	Theresa Roedersheimer	Tracy Zimmerman

---

## EDITING

Cathy Cambron, *Editcetera*

## DESIGN

Danielle Ness, *Hey Darlin'*

Suggested citation: Dahbi, M., Stevenson-Garcia, J., & Sharpe, N. (2023). *Listening to and learning from the community: North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education Stakeholder Engagement Study Community Report*.

